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Title: Equilibration, Assimilation, and Accommodation as Substrates of Racism

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Abstract. This article posits several psychological processes contributing to the inevitability of racism.

Racism is conceived as a scourge of public discourse among politicians advocating variants of representative liberal democracies. If nothing else it is a salient factor among politicians controlling and depending on the tools of coercion in authoritarian and even totalitarian regimes. In this latter case, racism becomes a problem if it subverts the efficacy of secret police, military, propaganda, and intelligence mechanisms. Even as the primary component of a regime's ideology, a component which increases in-group cohesion even as it ensures out-group demonization racism may harbor psychological tendencies inducing the regime's implosion.

The foes of racism suggest that some combination of (1) redistribution of material assets, (2) affirmative action in education and employment, (3) the identification and publicization of out-group achievements, (4) personal contacts and cooperation among in-group and out-group members, (5) leveling the playing field through "color-blind" social and cultural practices backed up by government-implemented sanctions, (6) forced integration, and (7) just plain old love will best vanquish the enemy. However, racism may be a very basic and inevitable outgrowth of psychological development. Such an hypothesis often is supported by tenets of psychodynamics, e.g., defense mechanisms such as projection; object relations theories concerning the development of self and other, the good and the bad, and pure and mixed types; analytic (Jungian) theories of shadows and archetypes. Support also can be obtained not only through cognitive-behavioral, humanistic, existential, and evolutionary tenets of molar psychological theory, but via Piagetian theories of intelligence and cognitive development.

To Piaget, intelligence is congruent with adapting to novel information. There are two main approaches to this adaptation, assimilation and accommodation. Confronted with novel information, e.g., something different, an individual may assimilate by reacting with already well-developed behavioral and intrapsychic tendencies. Given the assumptions that the loss of the self as the first nonself and the loss of the good as the first bad are two primal exemplars of the first other, i.e., of novel information, assimilation is ultimately founded on a cognitive set that is negative towards what must be adapted to. In essence the positive features of assimilation such as generalizing structures, processes, and functions as a facilitation of learning are accompanied by this negative cognitive set.

Again confronted with novel information, an individual may accommodate by actually modifying well-developed behavioral and intrapsychic tendencies. Accommodation entails the destruction of one way of being for another, of the self for an other self--a nonself until becoming the new self. The positive features of accommodation such as facilitating cognitive developmental processes are accompanied by sequences of life, death, and rebirth without resurrection. It is as if adaptation is founded on ever increasing archaeological layers of what was once thriving and vibrant.

To Piaget, equilibration is the motive force of cognitive development and is typified by the right balance of assimilation and accommodation in intelligence, in adapting to the world. That people are socially constructed as of different races--and as just different--with accompanying values is a consequence of

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an equilibration founded on an inevitable negative valuing phenomenon. Equilibration--as explicated by Piaget--impels a combination of two processes, each founded on the novel as negative, as the means of confronting the novel towards a goal of subjugation.

International and national committees to stamp out racism usually view the absence of racism as humanizing. But if equilibration, assimilation, and accommodation are humanizing in the sense of being what makes humans human, humanizing the human in the former sense actually dehumanizes. But only by thus dehumanizing the human may racism disappear. (See Levine, S.R. (1993.) Assimilation and accommodation in self-conception: Towards a dynamic theory of self-representation. Dissertation Abstracts International, 54(1-B), 500; Piaget, J., & Inhelder, B. (1969.) The psychology of the child. NY: Basic Books; Wachtel, P.L. (1980.) Transference, schema, and assimilation: The relevance of Piaget to the psychoanalytic theory of transference. Annual of Psychoanalysis, 8, 59-76.) (Keywords: Accommodation, Assimilation, Equilibration, Racism.)